

Fire Department History

(This history of the Duxbury Fire Department was published in the 25th anniversary issue of the Clipper.)

At a Special Town Meeting on June 11, 1904, it was voted that the selectmen investigate the matter of fire protection in other towns and report at the next annual Town Meeting. The following informal vote was carried unanimously: "That it is advisable that the fire apparatus be paid for partly by the Town and partly by the property owners in each section."

By 1905 Elisha Peterson was in charge of a fire wagon that was kept loaded with extinguishers, chemicals, a barrel of water, pails, shovels, and other equipment. According to Hortense Merry, who came here in 1899 after taking part in the Spanish-American War (he was born in Nova Scotia), there was no real fire department at the time. This does not mean that there had not previously been a fire department of some kind, for the records show that in 1834 and 1835 two Hunneman hand-engines were purchased. Eben Briggs, our present fire chief, showed us a photostat of an 1835 transaction that said: "Rec. of Gershom Bradford Esq. Treasurer for the Town of Duxbury, \$682.88 for the payment of Hunneman's bill for a fire engine for the Town of Duxbury, which we the subscribers were appointed by said town to purchase." (We reproduce this receipt just as it was written.)

Henry Wadsworth and Peleg Keen were on the board of engineers at the

time of these purchases. There were 29 men in the No. 1 company, 27 in No. 2. (The selectmen at the time were Elbridge Chandler, Daniel Bosworth, and Samuel Atwell).

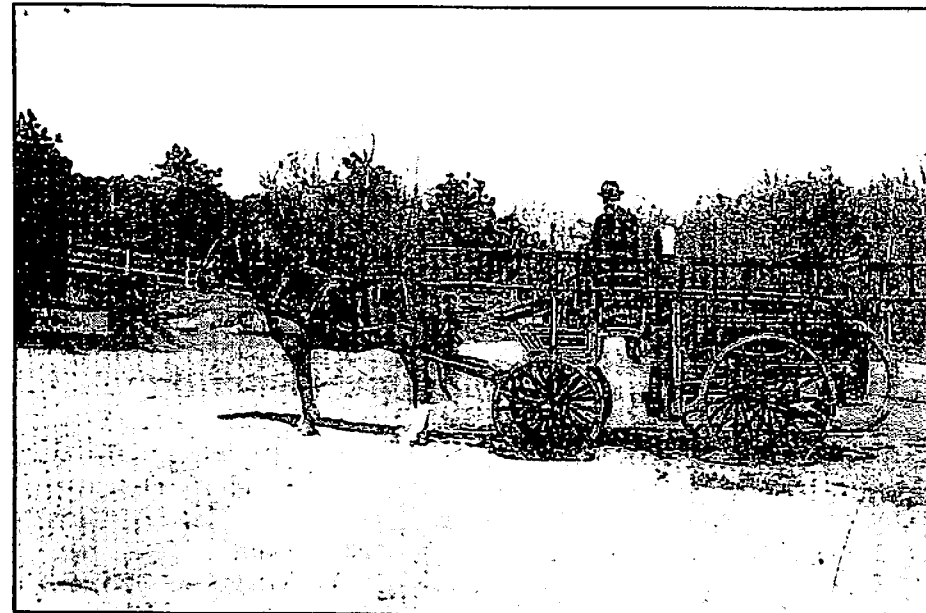
Old Hand-Tubs

Just what transpired between 1834 and 1947, when a 750-gallon pumper was added to Duxbury's fire-fighting equipment, nobody seems to know, and this brief account is at best a sketch of conditions since the turn of the century. The 750-gallon pumper, which replaced the 1923 Brockaway, carries 1,200 feet of two and one-half inch hose and has a ladder and a 150-gallon booster tank with 250 feet of booster hose. It is a far cry from the two hand-tubs which were bought more than 40 years ago, and which are presently stored in a barn on Standish Street.

According to Hortense Merry, certain Duxbury citizens were stirred up when Alexander Wadsworth's house on Washington St. burned early in this century. He says that Capt. Alexander's widow left some hot ashes in a wooden container in the shed. A fire was started that burned unchecked because "we had to stand around helpless watching it. We didn't have adequate equipment."

Site of Old Engine House

The selectmen appointed a board of engineers, and Frederick Knapp was named chief engineer. There is some debate as to whether Fredrick Knapp or Hortense Merry was the first fire chief of Duxbury, but from all that we could



A horse drawn hand-pumper used by the Duxbury Fire Department at the turn of the century.

learn from perusing the town reports, the term Chief of the Fire Department was not used until Merry was given the title. It boils down to a matter of nomenclature. For all practical purposes, Duxbury's first fire chief seems to have been Frederick Knapp, to be succeeded by Eden Soule, Hortense Merry, and Eben Briggs.

It was Knapp who first recommended that large areas of woodland be divided into smaller sections by fire lines. "A line of cleared earth, one or two feet wide, on which to start back fires, would in many cases enable a small force of men with extinguishers to stop a strong fire which they would be powerless to check otherwise." These

were the words of Knapp as quoted in Town Report dated Jan. 1, 1906.

A fire engineers board was organized on March 7, 1906. A new engine house was built for Engine No. 1 on land adjoining the present site of the library (Before this was built, the town office now moved across the street, occupying the site). At this time Knapp was called chief engineer. Two captains were named to organize companies composed of 20 men each, and at this time a plot of land measuring 40 by 125 feet was purchased on Chestnut St. near Depot St. to house Engine No. 2. In 1906 Duxbury had three fire wagons and two

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private ones. It was decided that the most serviceable wagons were those fitted with extinguishers, a water barrel, and "light enough for one horse to pull."

By 1914 the town had a forest fire department. "When the town can afford a motor truck properly equipped, that would be worth more than all the rest of the apparatus," read an entry in the 1914 Town Report. In 1916 Merry succeeded Eden Soule and was later designated fire chief. On the board of engineers were James McNaught, Charles Crocker, and LeRoy Peterson. In 1918 Merry asked for an appropriation for a motor-driven piece of apparatus for South Duxbury "as there are practically no horses available."

Perhaps Duxbury's worst fire loss came in 1921 when historic Ford's Store, "America's first department store," was burned. As late as 1923, the town was still handicapped if it had two fires to fight at once.

Merry in 1942 was succeeded by Eben Briggs, who is carrying on the fine traditions inaugurated by his predecessor. Merry likes to reminisce about the old days "when we used to drill every night, then sit down to hot coffee, doughnuts and cheese." In his 39 years of fire-fighting in Duxbury, he saw drama. When the L.P. Soule house (across from the Winsor House) burned, five adjoining houses were at one time burning. "And," says Merry, "there was for a time no water."

The Jacob Sever house was ignited by sparks. Merry can remember having to break into three houses at the fire to get buckets of water. He also remembers that Jake Sever and Ed O'Brien, whose house was also singed, each donated checks of \$50 to the fire department for a job well done.

There is no space to list men who served the department without pay for a score of years, or the fun the fire-fighters had when they tried to see which company engine could squirt water the farthest. Merry recalls the arson case, when a man named Lombardia got five years for trying to defraud an insurance company by burning his house. He also remembers those Christmases during the depression when the fire department gathered, repaired, and painted toys for needy kiddies of the town. "One year we sent 187 presents to the youngsters."

FORMER FIRE FIGHTING

(By Frederick Knapp, one time forest fire warden, at the dedication of the new fire engine house on March 26, 1929. H.E. Merry, Forest Warden and Chief of the Fire Department, in the chair.)

Mr. Merry, our energetic and able fire chief, has asked me to tell something of my earlier experiences with fire conditions in Duxbury. You all know I am much more interested in the condition of the present and in making improvements for the future, but orders must be obeyed!

The first of these experiences in Duxbury, some 42 years ago, was star-



Fire Chief Bill Harriman and firefighters with a slightly more modern fire truck.

ting, being awakened from a sound sleep to the vivid glare of a serious fire close at hand. It proved to be our old King Caesar cottage less than 50 feet from the main house. The fire was already through the roof, and the cottage became a total loss. But the neighbors turned out finely, and with the help of Johnston hand pumps and a big tank of water in the attic, our house was saved, the water being supplied by a force pump handled by one of the young women who came to help. After this I could do nothing less than assist where possible in similar emergencies.

One severe fire was when McNaught's barn was struck by light-

ning and burnt, while the house very near it was saved. I remember my part well, using a hand pump and a wash tub between the two buildings; other men, meanwhile, bringing water to keep the tub supplied. It got rather warm so someone threw a blanket over my head and shoulders, and occasionally a bucket of water would be thrown over me to enable me to hold the position. I was not able to see what was done by the others elsewhere, but at last the barn walls fell in and the house was only scorched.

We were cursed with forest fires then as now, and all hands turned out to fight them as volunteers without pay. Our ap-

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paratus consisted of shovels so far as obtainable, brooms and evergreen branches or small trees. A small red cedar is by no means a bad tool, and of course a pocket knife was needed to procure this implement. Soon were added a kerosene can, rags for a swab, and matches, the purpose of which is taboo in certain quarters.

Sunday was the favorite opportunity for the careless and the ignorant to make trouble. One vivid remembrance is of the sudden call of "woods fire" while at church; a grand rush to the scene not far back of the cemetery; a hard fight by men, women and children; and success with some damage to best clothes. Then, at another time, there was our



Former Chief Carl O'Neil now runs a dairy farm in West Duxbury

helplessness up High St. way, when backed by a strong northwest wind, a fire jumped the road and a broad open field to the woods beyond. You must remember that we had no telephones or automobiles then, and our roads were poor and sandy. We could see a cloud of smoke over the trees; start out either on foot or by horse to chase up the fire. Many times after miles of travel, we would find that the

fire was further off than when we started (or at least appeared so) and was never reached. The wonder is that, with so many fires and such adverse conditions, they were kept down so well and so much of our woodland was saved.

In those days there was a strong feeling of independence, and as one man at town meeting said in reference to road work, "We are not going to vote to have a man who doesn't know any more than we do stand on the bank and boss us." Maybe due to my training as a civil engineer I was convinced that organization paid and insisted that it ought to be applied to forest fire fighting. In 1900 they got even with me by making me a fourth forest fire warden, as we were then called. We organized with Horatio Chandler, chairman, and F. B. Knapp, secretary.

We inherited 18 fire extinguishers, which we bought five years earlier as a start toward house protection, to be located "in various parts of the town," but with no one responsible for their care. What a job it was to locate them in these "various parts of the town!" Some were burst by having been left to freeze when charged, others were empty but corroded, two were saved from freezing by being buried under a manure heap.

By 1903 there were eight wardens, increased apparatus with a list published of where located; we were well organized and made a formal report to the town. The next year we fitted out our first fire wagon, with Elisha Peterson in charge of it and of our supplies. That



The old Ashdod fire station which was rebuilt and dedicated last week.

year a committee was appointed to investigate fire protection, and in 1905 they bought the two hand fire engines you all remember. The board of fire engineers organized March 17, 1906 — F.B. Knapp, chief, E.H. Bailey, clerk — Engine House No. 1 was built side of the library, later moved to its present location, our honored chief H.E. Merry, captain. Engine No. 2 was temporarily housed until the new building was ready for occupancy in Sept. 1907, with J.H. Glover as captain. That house is now being replaced by the one in which we are gathered.

By 1906, the forestry equipment had increased to 100 extinguishers, two privately owned wagons, four town-owned and two more coming, with considerable equipment. We had already started on the principle of "The Small Unit" for one horse with little apparatus and a light load. Though legally independent,

the two departments were run as one with men and apparatus available for both house and forest fires. For a long series of years we did not have a single big forest fire nor, with our patrol, a secondary fire. The printed outline was: great help and gave unity to the work.

In 1908 lookouts were locating for forest fires by the intersection of range from towers in Plymouth and Duxbury. The first fire so located was on Manomet, and placed very accurately one station being 12 miles off. This led to my patent in 1912.

A point I wish to make is that those were progressive times, with local experiments, introduction of new ideas and methods, organization; and in the State the establishment of the Massachusetts Forestry Association followed by the State Forestry Department. It now rests with the coming generation to make a rapid progress as we did.